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ABSTRACT

The mission of St. Cecilia Elementary School (Omaha, Nebraska) is to foster a Christian learning environment that develops the spiritual, scholastic, emotional, social, and physical needs of each child. This paper describes the school's curriculum with regard to religious education for preschool, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Class activities include discovery, hands on, role playing, modeling, recalling/memory, reinforcement, discussion, presentation, service, and problem solving. The paper's discussion is divided by grade level; for each grade, examples of learning activities are presented. The preschool curriculum, intended to broaden the "me-oriented" thinking of young children, includes activities for the themes of Advent, poverty, caring for our world, Lent, love and caring for creation, and multiculturalism. Themes from the kindergarten curriculum include "I am Special," "I am a Friend," Baby Moses, prayer, Advent and Lent, and resurrection. First graders are encouraged to consider Jesus' teaching in their decision making and to work on their prayer life. Second graders have lessons that include scripture, doctrine, morality, and celebration, and are exposed to the Reconciliation and Eucharist. The paper concludes by describing other school activities intended to reinforce classroom learning, planning for parent participation, and an example of a Thanksgiving paraliturgy. (EV)

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Religious Education in Early Childhood Programs

By

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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Is it really *significant* to incorporate religion into the curriculum for the three, four, five, and six year olds? Well, do you claim you have "Catholic Identity"? The components of Catholic schools' identity are message, community, and service and it isn't difficult to teach the little ones :

to know (message)
to love (community)
to serve (service)

Our specific mission at St. Cecilia's Elementary School is to foster a Christian learning environment that develops the spiritual, scholastic, emotional, social, and physical needs of each child.....and that includes the early childhood branch. We educate in these dimensions creating a Christian community that shares, cares, and values the qualities and needs of a global society. What better place to begin....than with pre-school? YES, religion *is* significant.

As I interview prospective non-Catholic parents, I explain that the environment we establish is based on Roman Catholic Doctrine, which allows the faculty and staff to complement and support the family unit or *primary educator* of the child. I assure them that 95% of what we teach is what they will be teaching in their homes too. I caution them if they are Lutheran, Baptist, etc. to talk to their child about our teaching on Our Lady, confession, etc. Of course, if they are approaching second grade where we focus on Reconciliation and Eucharist, I tell them it is essential they cover those bases at home, before they are covered in class. The non-Catholic children take part in the religion classes just as everyone else does. Teachers are sensitive to their religious backgrounds and give them a chance to shine when ever possible. (We all know how the Lutheran children can quote Scripture. That doesn't hurt ours at all!) Teaching non-Catholic children has never been a challenge for us in religion. We've never had a complaint from a parent. Nor do we apologize for teaching the Catholic faith.

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I think it's safe to say that non-Catholics are enrolling their children in our Catholic schools because they respect and want the values education we offer. Religion is an important part of that. Remember, we aren't teaching religion just 15-30 minutes a day. We are living/teaching it ALL day.

Our instructional program includes the intellectual, moral, physical, and social experiences that will guide the child in Christian social living....even if he/she is only four years old. These experiences are presented in such a way that they meet the child's needs, stimulate his/her thinking, and offer an opportunity for acceptance of his/her limitations.

Various types of activities in early childhood religious curriculum for teaching/learning are used.

1) discovery
2) hands on
3) role playing
4) modeling
5) recalling/memory
6) reinforcement
7) discussion
8) presentation
9) service
10) problem solving

PRE-SCHOOL CURRICULUM SAMPLES

Because pre-schoolers are very "me oriented" our focus is Care for Others and that goal is accomplished by broadening the children through small group activities, especially "hands on".

1. Advent: in anticipation of the waiting, the pre-schoolers put straw in the classroom manger, IF they have cared for others that day.

2. Poverty: we have the story of the Loaves & Fishes, touching hunger and poverty and getting down to, "Have you ever

felt really hungry where your tummy really growls?" We make up a prayer in class for those children who go hungry. Then we ask ourselves, "What would Jesus want us to do? What would a kind person do? What would a selfish person do?" The class eventually offers to give their snack away one day!

3. Caring for our World: This correlates with Earth Day, recycling, etc. We use one of the Greg & Steve records, "We've Got the Whole World in Our Hands." The children learn the song and pass around their group a stuffed toy globe, making the "world" real to them. Of course we utilize Genesis and the "Story of God's World" in the children's Bible. We learn about God's world and how to take care of it, drawing pictures of people caring for God's world. We discuss ways people do not show they care.

4. Lent: There's a cross of the bulletin board. We talk about being kind and in that way traveling with Jesus while he carries his cross. We offer up one day to Jesus and those who have been kind all day put their own little cross on the big cross on the board. (Teaching the crucifixion isn't easy at this level!)

5. Love and Caring for Creation: Get Peter Spier's video, "Noah's Ark" from Blockbuster Video and teach the song, "Who Built the Ark?" from the Raffi album. Both are excellent tools for teaching love and concern for creation.

6. Multicultural: We try to expand from "our family" to "all families" globally and introduce children to other cultures and families. Purchase Joan Plaum's THE LITTLE RED HOUSE THAT GOD MADE. (This is one of a series of "I Am Special" religion books.) "All God's Children" is the perfect song to teach as it tells that Jesus loves all the children and each is just like another, a child like me and you, a very special son or daughter. Invite someone from another country to come in. We had a Japanese visitor who kept us all enthralled.

A TASTE OF KINDERGARTEN'S RELIGION CURRICULUM

1. I AM SPECIAL theme: Touch on our creation use a mirror

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to look at our eyes, ears. Bring colored picture of self to look at. Then we move to a focus on others and talk about sharing and caring. Books are available on both subjects and appropriate to stimulate discussion on HOW we show we care and share.

2. I AM A FRIEND: leads us to discussing how to appreciate friends and how to help friends. We end that unit with a prayer/song, "Thank You God for Friends."

3. BABY MOSES, etc.: The children's Bible is utilized for the story of Moses, Noah's Ark, story of Baby Jesus, etc. Filmstrips are available on those stories and there is material for drawing lessons.

4. PRAYER: Angel of God, Hail Mary, Our Father, and a decade of the rosary. When thanking God for what He has given us, we work on intentions for which to pray and at Thanksgiving, use a turkey feather to list what we are most thankful for. Those feathers form the tail for the front hall turkey on which each child has placed a turkey feather indicating gratitude.

5. ADVENT & LENT: Using our own hands we make a green handprint advent wreath with candles. We also make wreaths for the those which is our advent angel and surprise them with the gifts. The story of the first Easter is glorious. They are ready for it by the spring time.

5. RESURRECTION IS A CHALLENGE to teach to the little ones but we do cover Jesus rising from the dead in kindergarten.

FIRST GRADE CURRICULUM SAMPLES

Like the kindergarten, our curriculum is set up to follow archdiocesan guidelines, TO TEACH AS JESUS DID, religion manuals, and supplementals like NCEA's Vision & Values program and their AIDS curriculum. (*Specific examples are given in the remainder of the article.)*

In their decision making the children try to think of what Jesus as a young boy might have done or how he would have acted, whether it be donations for the Rice Bowl, collecting food for the poor, stockings for the needy, etc. As they fill Christmas baskets, bring mittens and socks for the Christmas tree, they put their faith into practice.

Along with memorized prayer, the children have the opportunity to develop their own prayer as they write petitions for their mass day.

At all school masses and on their particular "mass day", they find they are well prepared from studying about the mass in their text. An associate priest visits the class each week also and his presence is a plus. He explains the mass parts. Homilies are "kid oriented" so that the little ones can understand.

Songs in religion class and in music help the children learn that prayers can be in song form too: "If I Were a Butterfly", "His Banner Over Me Is Love", "Thank you God", and the "Friendship Company" tape are all excellent materials.

UP A STEP TO SECOND GRADE CURRICULUM

Each lesson is set up in a format that includes Scripture, doctrine, morality and celebration. That includes a relevant Bible story that is discussed as to how we use the teaching in daily life.

Many opportunities are provided in the lessons for individual prayers, petitions, etc.

Is the curriculum correlated? Yes, you bet! Much of what is taught in religion is reinforced especially in the areas of science, health, and social studies.

With the teaching of Reconciliation and Eucharist, the children begin to learn about their responsibility to serve others. We focus on simple ways: kindness, fairness, smiles,,

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giving to church, using gifts and talents wisely, caring for the world (recycling), etc.

Our liturgical celebrations, paraliturgies, are generally shared with all the primary grades.

ACTIVITIES REINFORCE LEARNING FOR LITTLE ONES

It goes without saying that teaching/learning activities can facilitate learning in the cognitive (knowledge, comprehension, application, etc.), affective (responding, valuing, etc.), and psychomotor (motor skill development, coordination, etc.) domains. In fact, they can be observed as reflecting a balance of all three domains.

Some of the activities developed to reinforce classroom learning in the upper pre-school levels, kindergarten, and first grade include:

A Marian Mass where mothers are especially invited.
A Lenten stations of the cross project. (As young as first grade, children make their own Stations of the Cross booklets. They talk about Jesus' suffering and offer their day to Jesus. The little ones also put up footprints as they try to follow the path Jesus followed.)
Simple Advent Prayer services.
Paraliturgies-liturgies about the saints planned by every class throughout the year.

In the affective domain, we have found that the NCEA VISION and VALUES Curriculum (all 8 Gospel values are integrated into all aspects of the curriculum) and the NCEA AIDS curriculum have been invaluable in bringing religion to other areas. Other activities include:

Vision and Values activities
New Creation series (family life education)
A stocking tree at Christmas for the needy
Taking advantage of well prepared tours of various exhibits held in our Cathedral Art Gallery

Inter-generational projects with nursing home when practical (We go to them and bring them into our building, as their activities director deems best.)

In the psychomotor domain, activities that promote intellectual as well as physical growth, motor skill development, and coordination are through presentation and role playing:

Taking part in liturgy in small ways, like the entrance procession, giving an intercession, being part of the offertory procession, etc.
Participating, even if just listening, in all-school liturgical music sessions.
Taking an active part in paraliturgies.
Service to the community....even if it's just picking up trash.

Our goals in early childhood's religious education curriculum are to help the children:
Have reverence of the Bible as a special book.
Experience the Bible as a story.
Sense creation as a gift from the Father.
Sense God as Father and parent.
Sense Jesus as the Son of God.
Recognize Mary as the Mother of Jesus.
Identify saints as friends of Jesus.
Express love of Jesus by loving ourselves and others (K).
Experience prayer as conversation with God.
Memorize the Sign of the Cross. (K)
Recognize love and joy as care of family life. (K)
Express concern for the poor and hungry.

Moving up to first grade we set goals to help the children:
Be aware that God makes each of us unique.
Be grateful to God and show respect for creation.
Know that God gives us special people in our lives to love and care for us.
Recognize Jesus as God's Son and the greatest gift to us.
Appreciate how families love and care.
Grow in experiences of being loved by Mary.

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Seek God and pray.
Pray as Jesus prayed. (Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, child's version of Morning Offering, Act of Contrition, Angel of God, Rosary, etc.)
Realize the need to respect and share the gifts of creation.
Experience more deeply prayer as communication with God.
Learn about the rite of Baptism.
Recognize the spirit of forgiveness and peace touching our lives.
Experience the Bible as the story of God's Word. (We study Scripture through the Children's Bible and Arch Books.)
Experience prayer through grade level paraliturgies . At Thanksgiving, the children in grades1, 2, and 3 make Indian or Pilgrim headdresses and join together to say thank you to God.)
Experience concern for the poor.
Identify saints as friends of Jesus. (For All Saints' Day we dress us as our patron saints to offer a litany in word and costume to all the saints. Song used: "When the Saints Go Marching In." Grades 1, 2, and 3.)
Before Christmas first graders build a Jesse Tree with symbols appropriate to the primary level.
A pro life paraliturgy for the primary and intermediate grades: 12 candles are set up to be lit for each month of birthdays celebrated by our students, as we celebrate life.
Speakers are brought in to visit with the children.
Columban Missionaries are brought in to each grade level presenting a suberb program.

PLAN FOR PROMINENT PARENT PARTICIPATION

Parents are constantly kept abreast of activities and curriculum. This begins at BACK TO SCHOOL NIGHT the first week of school. They are encouraged to attend the Paraliturgies, Eucharistic liturgies, religious plays, etc.

Using archdiocesan guidelines along with the Silver Burdett-Ginn series has kept us consistent and accountable .

PRACTICAL THANKSGIVING PARALITURGY

LET US GIVE THANKS

Opening Song: "O God, You Gave Us"

Introduction (priest or teacher): Today we thank God in a special way for all of the gifts He has given us. Just as the Eucharist is our celebration of thanksgiving for the gift of Jesus, so our sharing of food today reminds us of God's gift of creation. Let us remember the American Pilgrims and all people today who seek and rejoice in new life.

The Lighting of the candles (priest or teacher): Through Christ we are a light to one another. We need the light of all of the people in our class. We light the candle of each class, and we thank God for one another's presence in our lives.

Class #1 (One child from each class lights the decorated class candle.) WE ARE THANKFUL FOR OUR FAMILIES.
Class #2 WE ARE THANKFUL FOR OUR FRIENDS.
Class #3 WE ARE THANKFUL FOR OUR SCHOOL.
Class #4 WE ARE THANKFUL FOR OUR TEACHERS.
Class #5 WE ARE THANKFUL FOR ALL OF THE PEOPLE IN OUR PARISH WHO CONTINUE TO SUPPORT OUR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS.
Class #6 WE ARE THANKFUL FOR ALL OF THE WONDERFUL THINGS GOD GIVES TO US.

Priest or teacher: Let us listen to this reading from St. John. It tells how Jesus fed a large crowd of people. (Based on John 6: 1-13) One day Jesus and his friends wanted to go up into the mountains. Soon many people began to follow them. These people wanted to be with Jesus and listen to him. Jesus talked to them all day. By evening everyone was hungry. "There is a young boy here," Andrew told Jesus, "who has five loaves of bread and two dried fish. He is willing to share them" The boy gave his bread and fish to Jesus. Jesus thanked God for them. Then something wonderful happened. Jesus shared the food with all the people. Everyone had enough to eat. There was even food left over. More than five thousands people were fed with the

loaves of bread and the fish the boys had given to Jesus.

Short homily: priest

Petitions: (3rd graders) After each petition, the first graders will sing, "Let us pray to the Lord."

ALL RESPOND IN SONG, "Lord, hear our prayer."

1. For our Holy Father who leads us along the right path ...
2. For all of our priests who help us grow closer to God...
3. For our grandparents who share their faith and love with us...
4. For our families and friends who encourage us to be the best that we can be...
5. For those who are unable to join us today that they know they are always in our hearts and prayers.

Choral Reading by grades 1, 2, 3, THANKSGIVING STORY, from any child's book....but make it short!

Priest: Gentle God, we join others to thank you for all you have given us. Help us always to be grateful. Amen.

Closing Song: "Thank you, God, for giving us life, love, food, families, us."

When children are seated at the tables, we will sing, "For Thy Gracious Blessings" and enjoy a treat of pumpkin bread and juice, or even popcorn!

Bonnie Pryor, Principal
St. Cecilia Elementary School

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